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FOR REVIEW AND CLEARANCE BY BRIAN BROWNE

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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN SECESSION UNLIKELY DESPITE TENSIONS

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Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL ROBYN HINSON-JONES. REASON: 1.5 (d).

11. (C) Summary. While electoral divisions are under growing media scrutiny, most southern political analysts privately acknowledge that fears of imminent secessionism are unfounded at present. Though some disgruntled groups demand the creation of their own state within the federation, most do not call for complete severance. Issues reinforcing political cohesion in the South include momentum towards a national conference, interest over upcoming elections, potential spoils of oil revenue, and the ICJ ruling on Bakassi. Despite relative low risk at present, GON sensitivity to any potential secessionist war may influence decisions on domestic and foreign political issues. End summary.

CURRENT SOUTHERN SECESSIONIST RUMBLINGS

12. (U) The latest secessionist threat was declared on December 20, 2002 by Lagos-based lawyer Festus Keyamo, who announced the creation of an "Unarmed Revolutionary Council" to govern the "Future Republic of the Niger-Delta," complete with flag, national anthem, and coat of arms. According to press reports, Keyamo warned that the "future republic" would emerge if Nigeria failed to convene a sovereign national congress, engage "true fiscal and political federalism," and enact the on-shore/off-shore abrogation bill. Keyamo hoped the announcement would "raise the consciousness" of the South-South's oil-producing states. The movement's slogan is "This is a revolution, and it must succeed."

13. (U) Other well-known southern groups with secessionist tendencies or platforms include the Movement for the Sovereign State for Biafra (MASSOB), the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC), the Egbesu Supreme Council, and the Coalition of Oodua Self-determine Groups (COSEG), which consists of the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), Oodua Liberation Movement (OLM), Oodua Youth Movement (OYM), Yoruba Revolutionary Movement (YOREM), and the Federation of Yoruba Consciousness and Culture (FYCC). These groups held a joint press conference in September to decry the voter registration exercise, which they charged was "tailored to favor the Hausa/Fulani North." They publicly called for a UN plebiscite to determine Nigeria's future, including the right to ethnic self-determination and secession from the Federation. The groups pledged to "fight together for each nationality to be independent and build her own sovereign state, as an independent member of the United Nations."

SECESSION NOT IMMINENT, FOR NOW

14. (C) Despite rancorous posturing from some quarters and debate over the Miss World fiasco, individuals from major southern ethnic groups refute their compatriots' claims to be on the verge of secession. Though fearful the situation may change, Patriots leader Rotimi Williams told Poloffs on November 15 that Nigeria "is not at a critical stage yet. This is the opportunity stage to prevent deterioration of the country." As the head of a group of senior Nigerian statesmen, Williams envisions that a worst-case scenario could emerge whereby frustrated ethnic groups begin agitating again for a "political breakaway," either through peaceful negotiation or through war. Although Williams expects the GON would "crush" any violent rebellion, the underlying discontent "will come again" if frustrations are not addressed.

15. (U) Nigeria's older generation remembers the root causes of conflict that led to the Biafran War's outbreak, but the South's younger generation mostly remembers the war's terrible consequences. The idea of launching another civil war repulses young professionals and workers from across the South, many of whom were born during or survived childhood through the war. Throughout the southern states, stories can be heard about the severe economic hardship endured through the war years and beyond. Many Southerners still recount tragic fates suffered by family members who were killed directly, by collateral violence, or through starvation.

16. (U) TRACES OF UNITY AMIDST ETHNIC DIVERSITY. Though diminished since 1999, unifying forces of shared history and political struggle against military rule hold meaning for many Nigerians. Ardent pessimists of Nigeria's cohesion concede that traditional ethnic groups today are weaving a new pattern in the nation's political cloth. With near consensus, the South sees the June 12, 1993 national election as a major turning point, the effects of which continue to reverberate. Legborsi Saro Pyagbara of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) calls June 12 a "true water-shed day" in which the public "forgot about ethnic differences" to condemn the election's annulment. Hundreds of other analysts, pundits, poets and artists publicly share his view.

FIX IT AND MAKE US PART OF IT, OR WE'LL ABANDON IT

17. (C) ON-GOING CALLS FOR A NATIONAL CONVENTION. Most critics of the status quo focus on improving Nigeria's legitimacy, threatening secession only as a last resort. The two most frequent proposals to redress on-going southern grievances are to hold a national convention and to decentralize federal resource control. The most popular incarnations of these ideas are the "sovereign" national convention and the on-shore/off-shore abrogation bill. The national conference proposal has been floated for years without much forward momentum. NGOs regularly lobby and educate key political figures on the potential benefits of such an exercise, hoping to convince powerbrokers that one could be held without negating entrenched interests. Reformists and NGOs seeking long-term stability argue that geopolitical groups must send their respective representatives to forge a new social compact on unity and the role of Nigerian government. Serious, divisive issues impeding national cooperation must be discussed openly in a forum to devise new rules about how differences will be peaceably settled. The meaningful legitimacy of the current constitution is dangerously low, they warn, as it is a document inherited from military rulers.

18. (C) The South-South "in particular feels strongly that areas have been neglected," Williams asserts. For this reason, his Patriots group advocates restructuring the constitution to eliminate the belief that "no one will ever be president from the South-South" and that "unless one belongs to the majority ethnic groups, one stands no chance at all." To Williams, as long as Nigerian minority groups feel they are treated as "second class citizens," a serious threat to cohesion exists. He believes minority groups will not even try to contest in a system that seems to guarantee rule by groups historically dominating Nigerian politics. Asked whether "zoning", the presidency according to ethnicity does not encourage tribal divisions, Williams disagreed. He argued that if society is to "mature" toward equal opportunity devoid of ethnic opportunism, an institutionalized power-sharing arrangement must be implemented at least on a short-term basis.

19. (C) While some Nigerians fear a national convention would re-ignite disgruntled groups' secessionist tendencies, others argue such a meeting would diffuse underlying tensions and initiate a productive way forward. The Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR) claims that a national convention will "raise Nigerians' adrenaline but not lead us to kill ourselves." Had a convention been "called during the military years, the Niger Delta would have called for secession," CDHR posits. In today's civilian climate, particularly with the Bakassi issue at present (paragraphs 11-12), a national conference is unlikely to fan the embers of secessionism, they argue.

110. (C) Meanwhile, some groups are calling for the creation of their own state within the federation. One of the groups most disappointed by the nation's lack-luster performance in meeting public needs is the Ogoni people of Rivers State. The Ogoni believe they were martyred as a people for Nigerian

democracy, but many resent receiving so few dividends to date. In meetings held during a recent fact-finding mission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the National Commissioner for Refugees, and Poloffs, Ogoni members asserted that their only hope was to have an Ogoni state with its own resources administered according to their own decisions (septel).

MUTUAL SECURITY AND FOREIGN INTRIGUE: WHAT IF

11. (C) BAKASSI AND THE LIMITS OF ETHNIC AUTONOMY. CDHR thinks the October 10 ruling on Bakassi by the International Court of Justice further diminished the South's impulse towards secessionism by reminding it of its need for northern military coverage. "Bakassi has reminded the South that we live better together," remarked Belo Aideloje, Secretary General of CDHR. Combining the regions together, "Nigeria is seen as so mighty that no one (e.g. Cameroon) could stand up to it." The "mutual need for security" has sparked a "spirit of kith and kinship among communities of the South-South, South-East, and South-West," claims CDHR. Therefore, perceived mutual security needs has undercut ethnic animosities, they conclude. "There is an overestimation of the strength of ethnic groups. Each tribe knows its limits. People are careful to not be pushed outside the tensile strength of their own group," CDHR explains. Yet, it concedes that these ties have not been as well developed between the South and the North.

12. (C) Another source discounts the mutual security theory, claiming Obasanjo's true agenda is in fact to replace northern hegemony of the armed forces with diversified officers at the lower ranks. Proceeding slowly, carefully and quietly, avoiding media attention which would unravel the whole endeavor, Obasanjo has progressed to the point that the South no longer depends on the North for military support, he argues. Nevertheless, CDHR asserts, the South still believes military power is a northern product, a perception which reinforces cohesion.

13. (C) COTE D'IVOIRE AND THE WEST. External observers believe the GON's lingering memories of foreign roles in secessionist disputes affects its present decision-making on international affairs. Eusebe Hounsokou, Representative for Nigeria of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, thinks GON is with-holding direct military aid to Cote d'Ivoire because of a grudge held since civil war. Cote d'Ivoire was reputedly an arms conduit to Biafran insurgents. Should a similar conflict erupt here, many Nigerians ask what foreign actors, including the United States, would do. "When the critical time comes," Williams asserts, "I hope no foreign government will encourage any group to breakaway. I hope they instead will encourage the government in power not to ignore the problem or crush (the rebels)."

RIVALRY FOR SCARCE RESOURCES: STEEP CHALLENGES AHEAD

14. (C) Many, if not most, analysts fear uneven resource distribution and economic hardship are steadily corroding the country's stability. Daily street scuffles across the South have varied causes, but some relate to the question of national unity. George Ehusani, Secretary General of the Catholic Secretariat, blames most of the violence on poverty, which impedes Nigeria's forming "a melting pot like the United States." Given "impoverished conditions," he finds it unsurprising that violence erupts with "people biting each other." Competition over resources is often expressed as a conflict between "indigenes" and "settlers," two concepts whose precise definitions can differ wildly from one village to the next. Ehusani sees most of Nigeria's current threats to cohesion in these terms, including the complexities of expanding Shari'a.

15. (C) Ehusani, who traveled to Kigali last fall, is publishing his analysis of potential lessons Nigeria can learn from the Rwandan genocide. He fears "ethnic antipathies, combined with long-standing issues of perceived or real injustice, mixed with severe economic depression" could spark similar mass violence in Nigeria. While the military regimes "suppressed genocidal sentiments," under democracy, the situation now may be "boiling over." "Disorganized violence," Ehusani argues, is manifest between poor individuals. "If violence is organized by a Big Man," on the other hand, he fears it is used in Nigeria to "manipulate the Small Man versus the Small Man to the gain of

the elite." He claims religious teachings of peace and forgiveness are the main deterrents to all-out class warfare and mass violence in Nigeria.

COMMENT

16. (C) Nigerian unity may prove more resilient than expected from a cursory glance at the headlines on present violence and political posturing. Following Ehusani's theory of Nigerian conflict, one might ask what a "Big Man" might expect to gain from an organized secessionist movement and whether current political conditions make this strategy attractive. At the moment, Southerners are asserting their agendas tenaciously within the actual political framework and appear willing to see what opportunities may be yielded by upcoming elections. "Big Men" are busily seeking to maximize their share in the present political arena; "Small Men" are waiting to see what will happen next.

17. (C) Uncertainty about the elections' potential outcome is generating excitement, nervousness, and speculation. Still, the expectation that elections will indeed be held as scheduled in April and May is surprisingly widespread in the South. This expectation seems to be putting frustrations over the slow pace of progress on hold, even as challengers to incumbent officials engage rhetoric that is increasing public attention to problems the government has left unsolved. In some cases, anger over unresponsive government is being channeled into determination that the next government will be more responsive to their needs. Sincere or not, opportunists will keep threatening to secede to mount pressure on an otherwise unresponsive government.

18. (C) While the loudest commentators clamor for their ethnic group's representation at the government's helm, candidates who adopt popular issues in their platforms may bolster Southerners' commitment to democracy and the nation. Issues are not yet in vogue among politicians, but issues such as infrastructure, health care, and employment have nationwide relevance and popularity (septel). A few forward-thinking politicians are testing the plausibility of capitalizing on some issues' popularity for their political ambitions. General Ibrahim Babangida, one of the savviest politicians, recently condoned the possible utility of a national conference (reftel). However contrived a convention's outcome, the mere exercise would be highly welcomed by many Southerners. Politicians also have yet to exploit the positive nation-building sentiments related to the June 12, 1993 events. How to seize the spirit of unity engendered by the events without raising painful memories or embarrassing past political actors remains problematic. Creative and nation-minded leaders may find a way yet. End comment.

HINSON-JONES